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## **FAMILY REPATTERNING: Clearing ancestral patterns**

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### **Abstract**

Family Repatterning is based on systemic family constellation work and also incorporates the use of guided imagery and energy psychology. This embodied method done in a workshop setting enlists a healing circle of participants to help individuals trace their current life patterns back to their familial sources, which are often traumatic events in a family's past.

*If you think you're enlightened, go see your family!*  
Baba Ram Dass

### **Background**

Many seekers of transformation and healing intuitively recognize that deeply ingrained family patterns are the source of much of our suffering. These patterns repetitively play out in our lives through unsatisfying relationships, health problems, work struggles, financial issues, recurring conflicts, and feelings of isolation, or not belonging. Frustrated with re-enacting family-derived patterns, we apply all of our best self-help, therapeutic, and spiritual techniques, yet all too often these persistent patterns resist even strenuous efforts to overcome them. Striving for insight, opting out, directing our intention, working with the mind or emotions, rising above it all, and all attempts to "move on" only provide partial relief.

The shared belief systems underlying most methods of healing re-enforce the hope that through individual effort alone we can resolve issues originating in our social or familial milieu. Accordingly, we regard most problems as individual ones with individual solutions. However, family patterns exert a social or collective pressure upon us. Cutting ourselves off from our social systems to escape these patterns is a non-optimal solution since often it can result in social isolation. Through the practice of *Family Repatterning*, I've come to recognize that in our society we over-value the power of the individual and under-value the energetic connections binding groups.

## Family Patterns

In a one-day workshop session or a private phone session, clients come to me to access *Family Repatterning*, which derives from Family Constellation work (FC), a method evolved in Europe by former priest and psychologist, Bert Hellinger, now in his eighties. This method is practiced around the world. I first encountered it in 2000 and traveled to Germany to study with the founder and other master teachers, receiving certification in 2002 from the Hellinger USA training program. Into my practice of the work, I also incorporate other modalities (such as guided imagery, mindfulness, and energy psychology) learned in my twenty years as a health journalist and lifestyle coach.

Striving for authentic and lasting personal transformation can sometimes feel like you're swimming upstream. The effort to maintain yourself in opposition to non-optimal familial tendencies and pressures can become exhausting and near impossible to sustain. People underestimate the strength of forces beyond the self. The first challenge in initiating healing may be to experience the social current in an embodied way—from a witnessing state. The *Family Repatterning* (and constellation) process allows you to do that.

## The Greater Family

Our most immediate access point to these collective forces is the first system to which each of us belongs: the “greater family.” What I call the “greater family” extends beyond the immediate nuclear family to encompass parents, siblings, children, grandparents, and beyond - including all others to whom we are connected through bonds of love, loss or harm. Each greater family has a unique psycho-energetic framework that overarches and shapes the life patterns of individual family members. It may be nearly impossible for us to discern these family patterns, much less to consider them objectively, when from the beginning of life we exist in a framework comprised of an invisible, but dense and interlocking web of ancestral beliefs, history, experiences, and patterns.

## Family Repatterning

*They say that knowledge is power. In the method I call Family Repatterning, acknowledgement is empowerment.*

*Family Repatterning*, which derives from family constellation work (practiced by several hundred facilitators internationally for nearly twenty-five years) allows us to awaken, fully hold in awareness, and acknowledge specific ancestral sources of suffering and events that occurred before we were born. This process makes visible the precise occurrences that set in motion the patterns we repeat in an effort to “make things right.” For example, a client may experience depression and report that her mother was also depressed and inattentive. She will trace the problem to her mother’s lack of maternal skillfulness. Yet the suffering may originate with her maternal grandmother, who never got over the childhood death of one of her children. Succeeding generations remain connected to grandmother’s maternal experience by unconsciously recreating her sadness. All efforts to relieve the depression fail because that is how they stay connected to the maternal line. Acknowledgement of the suppressed grief opens the path to resolution, surrender, release, and the freedom to move forward into the future, supported by — rather than opposed by — the collective forces of family beliefs and practices. In effect, we are each symptom bearers, not only of the imbalances in our own individual selves, but also of the imbalances in the greater families to which we belong. When we identify the sources of imbalance and harmonize them, we engage in collective healing. Until we do this, we will continue to bear symptoms, which can influence our experience, behaviors, and the course

of our life. All too often, this enmeshment and our individual expression of the collective disharmony occur without our awareness.

In over a thousand sessions of the *Family Repatterning*/constellation process, I've seen countless variations on this theme. Here is a selection of some of the most common patterns that people bring forward, suspecting that their personal problems actually derive from family patterns, without understanding the originating causes:

- Conflicts with parents, siblings, and children
- Inability to thrive and participate fully in life
- Troubled relationships
- Difficulties in achieving life goals
- Feeling like an outsider, not belonging
- Self-sabotaging tendencies
- Chronic health problems
- Patterns of being abused and of abusing
- Fears of unknown origin
- Persistent grief
- Problems with adult children
- Recurring, similar, unusual patterns experienced by multiple family members
- Difficulty coming to terms with loss and tragedy

#### Example 1.

'Ron,' who came to the monthly workshops I hold in New York City, disclosed that his great-grandparents had had to flee Romania and go into exile. Three generations later, even though Ron achieved financial success, he reported a nagging sense that he was lost. His adult son, Adam complained that he did not "fit in" and could not hold down a job. Ron's first cousin, Stu had lost his home in a foreclosure, while Stuart's brother emigrated to Argentina due to strange circumstances that seemed somehow inevitable. Without their awareness, multiple family members carried within themselves, repeated through their behaviors, or attracted into their lives beliefs, feelings and circumstances and experiences similar to what their forebears had endured. Ron's ancestral experiences were not at the forefront of his mind. He regarded them as "ancient history." But when he saw them in a Family Repatterning session, he was able to honor his forebears' uprootedness, without feeling unconsciously called to repeat it.

The bottom line is this: Until the original situation is faced, the pain continues to be passed along. This occurs because in some way that we don't completely understand, the energetic pattern remains, even though the events are imperfectly remembered, denied, forgotten, or buried. Succeeding generations of family members become entrained in that pattern, albeit unconsciously. I believe that this occurs because just as an individual organism is self-regulating and moves towards wholeness, so is the greater family system. The hidden source of suffering produces symptoms until we uncover the cause and resolve it. *Family Repatterning* is a structured approach for doing just that.

### **The Family Repatterning Process**

The *Family Repatterning* process is typically done in a group setting that takes anywhere from fifteen minutes to one hour. I also do individual phone sessions using guided imagery. In the process, workshop members are selected to act as "representatives" of key family members. The client arranges them intuitively as he feels them to be in what Bert Hellinger has called a "constellation." Their positioning in relationship with the other participants, along with their emotional and kinesthetic responses to their participation in this process, reveal connections between the ancestral sources of suffering and the client's life pattern. Throughout the

Repatterning process, I invite the representatives to “report” their “felt sense.” Their emotional and kinesthetic awarenesses reveal the instigating causes to the underlying patterns.

With progressive realignments, in position, relationship, and feeling, the family represented moves towards resolution of the uncovered issues. The realignment follows definite laws observed by worldwide practitioners of this method, and includes repositioning people as well as using “soul language” that resonates with the greater family. Once an ancestral pattern is made conscious, it no longer ferments inside; instead it is held in a wider field of awareness — freeing people to resolve and release it from being a controlling influence in their lives.

In the process, specific prescriptive resolutions are offered and enacted. These often differ radically from our given concepts about what healing might look like. For example, people often expect that parents who acted in harmful ways “should” apologize to their children; or that children “should” forgive their parents. However, in the perspective of Family Repatterning, more beneficial than an apology is for the accountable party to take responsibility, accept the consequences of their actions, or carry the resulting feelings. When the representative’s felt response indicates readiness, these understandings are reflected in the healing language that I and other FC facilitators suggest to the representatives that they say.

#### Example 2.

Instead of saying “I’m sorry,” a grandfather who abandoned the client’s grandmother and infant daughter, might say, “I carry the consequences.”

#### Example 3.

In a session done for a woman who distrusted men two generations after her grandfather had an extramarital affair and an out of wedlock child, the resolution consisted of his wife (the client’s grandmother) seeing the secret lover and child, and then telling family members, “I see them; I’ll carry my outrage, not you.”

It’s important to note that in cases where the representative of the accountable party is not ready to accept responsibility, then the work will reveal and hold in awareness their inability to do so. However, apart from experimenting to discover what feels “right,” it is important avoid prescribing behaviors or statements that don’t “ring true” for the representatives, unless their use is paradoxical and designed to surface an inner reality. *Family Repatterning* is not a “magic wand” that we wave to make people do as wished. However, we do find that what Bert Hellinger has called the “healing movements” do continue to evolve after the session, sometimes for months or years, such that a blocked movement revealed by the process may shift later.

Workshop participants frequently report that they are deeply moved by the *Family Repatterning* process. I have personally experienced (and my workshop participants often confirm) that healing can be experienced whether one is present as the client, a representative, a witness, or indeed as the facilitator. This occurs because the healing is truly collective. Yet the resolutions frequently differ from our given concepts or “stories” about our families going in. For example, in Example 3, the client carried her grandmother’s angry feeling and felt like she was owed an apology from men in her life. Accordingly, when the act of betrayal came to light, her sense was that the grandfather should apologize. However, by taking it upon herself to resolve her grandparents’ relationship she was stepping out of her role as the grandchild into an inflated position. From the collective view, this is a misalignment, albeit a common one. It was the grandmother’s responsibility to deal with her marriage and shield her children from a painful matter in the parental generation. But instead, her denial of the secret relationship (as well as her unconscious anger as she sensed the betrayal) was carried by her daughter and granddaughter.

In my experience, at a certain stage of personal evolution, a number of given concepts, such as the “shoulds” around forgiveness, the sense of grandiosity around one’s ability to fix our elders’ problems, and others like these, actually serve to re-enforce the problematic issue or health concern.

### Concepts about healing

If I had a dollar for every woman who comes to one of my workshops, and tells me, “I’m the mother, and my mother is the child,” I’d be wealthy. I also happen to know this perspective from personal experience myself. This view reinforces the imbalanced dynamic between mother and daughter rather than relieving it. It may initially feel more empowering to “take control” of the mother-daughter relationship by being the “big” or mature one. But in the long run, it serves people best to wherever possible surrender that control and either accept the relationship, which at the very minimum gave one life, (no small thing) or receive from female ancestresses who feel more available, such as a grandmother. It is more challenging to find our rightful place in life, when we persist in occupying the parental role in our childhood family. Even the most immature, abusive, absent, and/or inadequate mother on earth is still the mother. Mental understanding alone or even “forgiveness” can rarely help us come to terms with that paradox. By opening us to the collective ancestral realm, *Family Repatterning* can provide the direct experience of that reality opening people to receive love and life force from their lineage rather than going it on their own.

The most frequent question people at my workshops ask me is, “What if I don’t know what went on in my family?”

In my experience, about ninety percent of the time, people know enough to point the session towards the key trauma in the past through rumor, story, or innuendo. Five percent of the time, the *Family Repatterning* process will surface it, even when the actual situation was unknown. And the last five percent may remain a mystery.

#### Example 4.

At a recent workshop, in a Repatterning done for Eileen who felt like a “bystander” in life, we set up representatives for her parents. In that session, it became apparent that the client’s mother was disengaged from other family members and looking to an unseen person. When a representative stood in for that unknown person, from the feeling responses of the client’s mother and the unknown man, it became apparent that this was a love relationship in the mother’s past.

“Who’s *that*?” asked the client.

Lost loves, former partners, and other “unseen people” frequently make their presence known in this process. These may include those who died young, comrades of war, victims of ancestors, and many other kinds of excluded people — people the family cannot or does not want to see or acknowledge, due to grief, shame, or other painful feelings.

As I endeavoured to explain to the sixty-year old client the possibility that her mother had loved a man, prior to the client’s father, the client beat me to the punch, “Oh, that’s *Tony*,” she said. (No information about him had been provided or even hinted at up until that point.)

According to this view, Eileen’s mother’s first love, Tony, had a place in the system. Actively including him (through placement and verbal acknowledgement in the Repatterning process) helped all family members -- the client and her Dad -- to find a deeper understanding of their rightful places in relation to Mom and to each other. In effect, the client had been confined to the role of bystander as the unseen relationships resonated at a level below conscious awareness.

Now she could become the active player in her own life. Seeing her mother with the “missing” true love also helped her to connect to her Mom, and along with that, to her own “love” potential.

When we deeply understand that we are not individual entities struggling on our own but that we integrally belong to the greater family system — which itself is a hologram, then it follows that if someone is missing, it creates an imbalance. Including and acknowledging the unseen person restores the system to balance.

### **Long-term consequences**

Coming together as a virtual tribe for a day-long workshop reconstitutes our collective roots. In bygone days, people lived in tribes and small communities that provided support for people and families undergoing life traumas. Due to emigration, modern social mobility and the social fragmentation in modern society, that collective support has been lost. As a result, when a traumatic event occurs in a family, there are now even fewer resources for processing and integrating it. The people involved become overwhelmed, and may repress or deny the facts, or compensate in other ways. There is often a psycho-energetic disconnection from other family members. For example, an ancestress in grief over the childhood death of one of her children will often be less emotionally available to her other children. This disconnection from Mom will continue down the generations as a family pattern. With disconnection rather than connection as a part of the foundation of family life, people grow up feeling “on their own.” In light of these sorts of disconnections in presenting problems in therapy, we can appreciate that many methods of healing are themselves symptomatic of the very problem of disconnection they aim to solve — because they emphasize individual options such as individual choice, personal insight, strengthening the client’s intention, and “moving on” without having addressed the buried family disconnections lurking in the client’s family fields. That is why many therapists who refer clients to my workshops report that the *Family Repatterning* process functions as a helpful “booster” to individual therapy.

While personal accountability and accessing self-care are indeed vital, the attendant emphasis on individual empowerment will often prove illusory because it ignores the reality that we are both “actors” and “acted upon.” We tend to emphasize the former to compensate for the overwhelming experience of the latter. *Family Repatterning* brings them both into balance through providing a virtual holding pattern for even the harshest realities.

By providing a way to witness the original experience in a safe group setting, *Family Repatterning* recreates a communal holding environment that supports the integration of that experience, freeing you and your family from repeating it. This embodied experience is far more powerful than mere cognitive insight. especially because it’s only by activating the “adult” and “witnessing” dimensions of the client that they can understand and experience more compassion for ancestral suffering. For me, that’s where this work connects with the spiritual practices of many traditions. It makes human interconnection a living reality.

In *Family Repatterning*, the shared goal of facilitator and client, working together, is to trace a client’s life pattern energetically and safely to a key source of suffering and to address it. Once we find the original source of disconnection, it becomes possible to connect people to their parents and ancestry so that they can access them as a source of life and life force. *Family Repatterning* is both symbolic and embodied, so it can capture and help to integrate even the most painful experiences. Resolution comes from re-connecting through seeing, acknowledging, honoring, respecting, and agreeing to reality and whatever happened.

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